

**Women of Power:
The Image of the Witch and Feminist Movements in Poland**

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Abstract

The following article deals with the socio-political image of witches and concentrates on the links between certain witch images and the ideology of some feminist movements in contemporary Poland. The core stereotype of the witch (the dangerous yet very much needed Other in the Christian culture) is first presented, followed by its feminist interpretation (the free, independent woman who lives on the edge of patriarchal culture), and the Pagan witch stereotype (which largely agrees with the feminist interpretation). In the due course the brief history of intertwining web between modern witchcraft, women's spirituality and feminism is shown, along with the examples of Margaret A. Murray, Z. Buda-

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pest, and Starhawk. The second part of the article is dedicated to the Polish background: from the feminist-political discourse to the image of the witch in the contemporary arts. Some recent cases—including organizing the first official rally of the twenty-first century Witches as the proclamation of tolerance and the social discussion on the statue of Katarzyna Włodyczkova, the witch of Czeladź—are presented to show how the image of the witch has been incorporated to the broader feminist discourse, proving that the power of a female witch-figure remains a strong symbol and a core concept.

Keywords: Witches-image; contemporary Polish Paganism; stereotypes; feminist movements.

Do you believe this story? Thousands of women do³

— Diane Purkiss

An old woman with a long, hooked nose, covered in warts, wearing a pointy hat and living in a cottage at the edge of the village with her ever-present cat companion; a woman who can spoil her neighbor's milk by simply looking at it and who spends her free time on a broomstick, whizzing through the air en route to a Sabbath—such is the most typical and popular image of a witch. Yet Western—and not only Western—culture knows many other images of witches, which stem not only from the statements of victims of witch trials (and subsequent historical and/or mythical narratives that these events occasioned), but also from parallel mythologies, from the later emergence of the complex system of western esotericism, and now from pop culture representations.

This article will examine the socio-political image of witches, concentrating on the links between certain stereotypes of witches and the ideology of some feminist movements in contemporary Poland. The aim is to present, from a theoretical and psychological point of view, the ways of stereotyping the image of witches, up to the point where the feminist witch mythologeme emerges—the free, independent woman who lives on the edge of patriarchal culture—and the utilization of this counter-image in various fields of Polish feminism.

It should be noted that Poland is not a typical cultural field as far as contemporary Pagan religion and also feminism are concerned. Cultural discourse in Poland is dominated by Christianity, especially Catholicism, and any other religions and their adherents are minorities that live on the cultural margins. Indeed, even the largest

3. Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), 7.

“religious minority” of Poland, which is in fact atheists (5-7 percent of the population), can be considered a minority culture.⁴ Contemporary Paganism in Poland is, in its turn, dominated by Rodnovery:⁵ the two biggest Pagan organizations that are officially registered in Poland both refer to the tradition of Slavic Native Faith (Rodnovery). In this environment, Wicca and other traditions that draw on the witchcraft phenomenon are a minority within a minority, which means that the ideas and trends formed by Wiccans or other Pagans in the United States or Great Britain or other Western countries have a limited impact on Polish Pagans, especially since Slavic Native Faith/Modern Pagan movements are quite male-dominated, though the rising prominence of the female element in those groups can also be observed.⁶ Nevertheless, the feminist movement has a social and media presence in Poland, and a voice in the political debate. It would, therefore, be worthwhile to examine the symbolical sources of inspiration for the modern Polish feminists, and indicate those elements of the witch myth that can have a use in this characteristic cultural reality.

The Witch Stereotype

One of the basic functions of a stereotype is cognitive simplification and condensation of cultural knowledge on a given phenomenon that can aid an individual in communication processes, especially in relations between groups. In other words, a stereotype is an explanation that saves time and energy (conforming to the cognitive economy principle), and a container for a group's beliefs, and, as such, it can be a communication tool.⁷ For these reasons, the cultural Other is often the subject of stereotyping, since a stereotype of an Other helps

4. Radosław Tyrała, *Bez Boga na co dzień: Socjologia ateizmu i niewiary* (Kraków: Nomos, 2014).

5. Cf. Scott Simpson, “Strategies for (Re)Constructing Religious Practice in Polish Rodzimowierstwo,” in *Walking the Old Ways. Studies in Contemporary European Paganism*, ed. Adam Anczyk and Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska (Katowice: Sacrum Publishing House, 2012), 11-34.

6. Scott Simpson, “Immanencja i polityka: dlaczego polscy i amerykańscy neopoganie są tak podobni, a zarazem tak różni? (opis zjawiska),” *Nomos. Kwartalnik Religioznawczy* 51/52 (2005): 11-33, and Mariusz Filip, “Native Faith (Not) Only for Men: Gendering Extreme Right-Wing Slavic Neopaganism in Poland,” *Pantheon: Journal for the Study of Religions* 10, no. 1 (2015): 56-78.

7. Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt, and Russel Spears, “Social, Cultural and Cognitive Factors in Stereotype Formation,” in *Stereotypes as Explanations: The Forma-*

to establish the boundaries of “us vs. them,” although “we” may also be stereotyped by those we label as “them.” A witch, in Christian cultural environments, represents the Other, someone with whom a member of a community must somehow deal, and, on the basic interpersonal level, about whom they must possess some basic cultural information concerning the traits that define a person as a witch and the prescribed manner of interacting with them. A stereotype is also a way of conveying meaning: for example, without the knowledge on witch stereotypes, the famous line from the British comedy film *Monty Python and Holy Grail*, “We found a witch, may we burn her?” makes no sense. Should the witch be swapped with any other, culturally neutral subject, the sentence will be bizarre. It is the witch who gives meaning to it.

In the perspective of social psychology, stereotypes have two main properties – on the one hand they facilitate communication, through familiar cognitive schemes, and on the other hand they can obscure the truth about something, giving inadequate (and often harmful) information about the ones who are being stereotyped. A typical witch does indeed have abilities that non-witches might conceivably envy, especially practical ones like flying on a broomstick, placing a curse on the neighbor’s cows to stop them lactating, or magically doubling their own herd of cows. Envy of such abilities might lead to a desire to portray the possessor of these abilities in a negative manner. However, there are other traits that determine the typical opinions that are held about witches. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, in his summary of Western cultural stereotypes of witches, lists nine base traits of the main witch stereotype. From the point of view of this article, the important traits from Hanegraaff’s list are the assumption of witches being members of a secret, anti- or non-Christian cult, their practice of magic, the sexual nature of their rites, and the vast majority of them being women.⁸ According to Polish linguist Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska, the two key elements of the witch stereotype in modern Polish pop culture representations are magical ability and female gender. Literature and film introduce variations on this theme by adding the elements of morality (good/

tion of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups, ed. Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt, and Russel Spears (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

8. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “From the Devil’s Gateway to the Goddess within: The Image of the Witch in Neopaganism,” in *Belief Beyond Boundaries: Wicca, Celtic Spirituality and the New Age*, ed. Joanne Pearson (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 297–99.

evil) and looks (beautiful/ugly).⁹ The physical appearance component—in itself a culturally variable idea—is interesting here, since it often becomes the deciding factor in the evaluation and categorization of women. In Polish culture, the stereotype of a witch being old, ugly and evil remains strong, possibly because of the continuing influence of traditional folk tale motifs, but also because of contemporary usage of these elements. The word *jędza* literally means “witch” or “hag” but is used in the same way English language uses the word “shrew.” The typical witch is called *Baba Jaga*, the word *baba* in itself being a pejorative term describing a woman who is uncouth, unpleasant, impolite and, often, ugly. This kind of witch is a social outsider, as she lives in a hen-footed cottage deep in the forest, far from other people. However, fantasy literature, films, role-playing, and video games broaden this spectrum.

An important thing about stereotypes is that they are, to coin a phrase, culturally ubiquitous: any participant of a culture in which a stereotype exists will learn of the stereotype’s existence at some point in their acculturation, whether through informal contact with specific expressions and processes of the surrounding culture, or through formal education processes, like school. Niesporek-Szamburska’s research is interesting in this context. She interviewed 274 schoolchildren, divided into two age groups of seven to ten years and eleven to thirteen, on their typical perception of witches.¹⁰ The most common response among the children in the younger sample set was the association of a witch with a bad lady (48 percent). There was further agreement on the moral character of witches, with 88.3 percent of the children using negative epithets to describe them.¹¹ As far as the looks and attributes of a witch were concerned, drawings made by the children showed mainly women (age not being significant), dressed in black, with a pointy hat, a broomstick and a cat. Despite her presumed evil character, the witch did elicit some sympathy from 48 percent of the respondents (girls being more sympathetic, in both age groups). Comparing the results from the two age groups, Szamburska notices a “fading” of the witch stereotype among the older children, meaning that traits that were not considered typical for the stereotype were perceived as well, along with a growing

9. Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska, *Stereotyp czarownicy i jego modyfikowanie na przykładzie tekstów dla dzieci i wypowiedzi dziecięcych* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013), 68.

10. Ibid., 121.

11. Ibid., 130–31.

consciousness of the fictionality of the character, with the older children proving more likely to place witches among fictional characters. There was also an intriguing attempt at modifying the stereotype, to “shift the stereotype of a *witch* to a side image of a *good witch*” (emphasis in the original).¹² However, Szamburska was not, in the end, optimistic about the likelihood of the witch stereotype either taking on more positive qualities or being abandoned altogether, since further analysis showed continuing dominance of the prototypical, negative mythological image.¹³ The stereotype of a witch is, therefore, ingrained quite early in the process of cultural education, and its content (chiefly negative) influences later linguistic and social behavior: a witch remains something bad, an abhorrent female image referring to culturally undesirable practices (black magic), attitudes (maliciousness) and/or physical traits (ugliness).

Apart from this popular witch stereotype, another one is in evidence, one influenced and shaped by feminist scholarship on the witch hunt phenomenon. Perhaps the best-known feminist explanation of the witch trials is the opinion that “real” witches never existed, that hordes of women were falsely accused, and that the whole phenomenon of witch hunts was a case of psychopathology, a kind of anti-female hysteria that swept through much of Western civilization. The feminist philosopher Mary Daly termed it a “Sado-Ritual Syndrome.”¹⁴

The negative stereotype of a socially malignant, un-Christian woman with dangerous, disruptive powers was reinterpreted by Western feminists and revised into the more positive image of a free, solitary woman living on the edge of the woods and of society, who might be a herbalist or, a midwife, a woman often relatively sexually liberated for her times, who was persecuted for her transgression of patriarchal social norms. The witch was thus, to quote Diane Purkiss, “constantly cast and recast as the late twentieth century’s idea of a proto-feminist, a sister from the past, the witch has undergone transformations as dramatic as those in any pantomime.”¹⁵ This new feminist understanding saw the witch as an early feminist that fought

12. Ibid., 148.

13. Possibly, the “exception rule” is in play here: being aware that good witches can exist is not enough to significantly modify the stereotype of a bad witch.

14. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism. With a New Inter-galactic Introduction by the Author* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 180.

15. Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth Century Representations*, 9.

against the dominant, oppressive phallocracy. This new view of the witch soon crystallized into an article of faith among feminists and many supporters of the feminist movement, resulting in a new, *positive* stereotype. The traits ascribed to the witch and deemed negative by patriarchal culture were now inverted and re-valued by this feminist interpretation, so that the witch became a paragon of virtue. Revised in this way, the witch stereotype does indeed fit well with the feminist narrative, and can be seen as its symbolic embodiment. The history of the feminist movement shows that a modified version of the witch stereotype is quite potent in that context, as it also is among feminist-oriented forms of modern Paganism like the Goddess Spirituality movement.

One of the most interesting versions of the witch stereotype is that of Wicca, which has the further dimension of overtly religious significance.¹⁶ The Wiccan witch is a highly positive image, firmly connected to the natural and supernatural world and a worshipper of the old gods. Persecution of witches was and is to some extent an integral part of religiously interpreted history in Wiccan belief. The persecution associated with witch hunts was denounced by some Wiccans as a “holocaust against women,”¹⁷ and vows were made of “never again the burning times” in regard to the claim of millions of women burned as witches.¹⁸ Though the notion of an anti-female holocaust by proponents of the Burning Times idea has been largely discredited by historians who have shown that the estimates of massive numbers of witches hunted and burned are greatly exaggerated, the way in which some of Wiccans and feminist witches embraced this fallacious view of history and found deep meaning in it shows how the historical reality can also become *illud tempus*, mythical reality.¹⁹ Referring to historical events and reinterpreting

16. The Wiccan attitude towards stereotypes is not uniform. According to Susan Greenwood, some Wiccans (especially in Traditional Wicca) accept a stereotypical view of women and femininity (such traits as intuition, emotionality, compassion, nurturing), while other “allegedly practice magic to transform what they regard as the patriarchal social structures.” Susan Greenwood, “Gender and Power in Magical Practices,” in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 149.

17. Joanne Pearson, “Witches and Wicca,” in *Belief Beyond Boundaries: Wicca, Celtic Spirituality and the New Age*, ed. Joanne Pearson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 164.

18. Loretta Orion, *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revisited* (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1995).

19. Helen Cornish, “Spelling out History: Transforming Witchcraft Past and

them through the lens of religious belief is a well-established method of rooting a religion in ancient history. This is especially important for a modern religion like Wicca, which was founded on a claim to represent the direct continuation of ancient traditions from the times of antiquity.²⁰ Michael Cooper calls this an “ancientization” of religion, a phenomenon present in other forms of contemporary Paganism as well.²¹ David Waldron summarized the process, which can be called, in psychological terms, a stereotype modification: “Neopagan histories invert the stereo-types, caricatures and symbolic representations of the witch, the feminine and nature in enlightenment narratives and represents them as an alternative vision of a possible social, cultural and spiritual order in Western society.”²²

The Wiccan witch stereotype is largely in agreement with the feminist interpretation, which is not surprising, given the interrelationship and mutual influence of the two movements.²³ It seems that, historically, the two stereotypes were strengthened by interpretations of witchcraft as a secret fertility cult, a view of witchcraft advanced by Margaret Murray²⁴ that has influenced many others.²⁵ A paradoxical conformity to an earlier version of the witch stereotype—the devil worshippers—was noticed by Eliot Rose, who said that both these interpretations paint witches to be a religion, or cult.²⁶ Wouter Hanegraaff also points to some common ground in these stereotypes.²⁷

Present,” *Pomegranate* 11, no. 1 (2009): 14–28.

20. Cultural credibility of a religion is also an important factor here—the currently dominant monotheisms are historically rooted narratives.

21. Cf. Michael T. Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry. A Historical and Ethnographic Study* (Salt Lake City: Sacred Tribes Press, 2010) especially chapter three, “Ancientization and the Revival of Druidry.”

22. David Waldron, “Post-Modernism and Witchcraft histories” in *Paganism. Critical Concepts in Religious Studies. Volume I: History and Development*, ed. Barbara Jane Davy (London: Routledge, 2009), 114.

23. Wendy Griffin, “The Embodied Goddess: Feminist Witchcraft and Female Divinity,” *Sociology of Religion* 56, no. 1 (1995): 35–48,

24. Adam Anczyk, „Kobieta-legenda na tropie legend. Życie i dziedzictwo Margaret Alice Murray (1863–1963)” in *Czarownice: studia z kulturowej historii fenomenu*, ed. Adam Anczyk, Julia Doroszevska, Karolina Maria Hess (Katowice: Sacrum, 2017): 56–57.

25. About Murray’s influence on Pagan movements see Catherine Noble, “From Fact to Fallacy: The Evolution of Margaret Alice Murray’s Witch-Cult,” *The Pomegranate* 7, no. 1 (2005): 5–26.

26. Elliot Rose, *A Razor for a Goat: A Discussion of Certain Problems in the History of Witchcraft and Diabolism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 19–20.

27. Hanegraaff, “From the Devil’s Gateway to the Goddess Within,” 307.

The emergence and development of feminist interpretations of the witch in academic, philosophical, and theological discourse, as with the aforementioned Mary Daly, supplied arguments for the women's emancipation and equality movements. It can be said that nothing strengthens a stereotype as well as discovering that some of its elements are "true," where "truth" is an opinion held by the broader public and intellectual authorities.

It should be also noted that Margaret Murray herself was a women's rights activist, something she discusses in her autobiography although—according to her biographer Kathleen Sheppard—Murray only mentions it very modestly, even though her actions in advocating for women's equality, especially in academia, were quite significant.²⁸ Thus, there is a connection between the history of feminist interpretation of witchcraft and social activism of one of the most well-known feminist authors on the subject of witchcraft.

David Waldron noted that in the 1980s there was a certain switch in perceiving witchcraft, which came with new publications and voices from academia from the universalist views on the subject (witchcraft and witch-hunts as an unified phenomenon) to local studies that exemplified particularities and often were not coherent with global theories. Thus, within Pagan, Wiccan, and feminist witchcraft new ways of interpretations have become more popular. Waldron enumerates four attitudes towards history of witches: the antiquarian (more connected with historiography, re-creating historical folk practices, connected with local identities; the traditionalist (connected with a lineage of practices, like in Gardnerian or Alexandrian Wicca); the New Age/eclectic (a reference to universal ideas, archetypes of a witch); and the eco-feminist (concentrated on an image of a witch as a symbol of persecution in a patriarchal culture). The "psychologization" of the witch-image, such as in the writings of Starhawk²⁹ represents an interesting switch in myth hermeneutics—witches can

28. Kathleen L. Sheppard, *The Life of Margaret Alice Murray: A Woman's Work in Archaeology* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013), 105–108.

29. And with those came along other reiterations of the myth. In feminist witchcraft the spiritual side was strongly connected with political action, thus forming a platform on spiritual witches and feminist activists met. Cf. Susan Greenwood, "Feminist Witchcraft: A Transformatory Politics," in *Paganism. Critical Concepts in Religious Studies. Volume III: Gender and Paganism*, ed. Barbara Jane Davy (London: Routledge, 2009), 166–78.

represent universal psychic qualities, so it is a turn from historical to psychological interpretations.³⁰

The four attitudes enumerated by Waldron share the one important feature, and that is the issue of identification. This brings us to the last dimension of the witch stereotype that is important from our point of view: the fact that a stereotype can be strengthened when a particular social group identifies with it, even in part. The positive traits ascribed to a stereotype are especially good material for this kind of adaptation. To give an example, among Poles, Germans are stereotypically seen as dependable, conscientious, and exact, but devoid of a sense of humor. A German person may find it flattering that they are valued for their soundness, thus identifying with the stereotype.³¹ They can also (ironically) joke about the supposed German lack of a sense of humor.³² In both cases this person will, in the eyes of their environment, confirm the stereotypical traits of “a German,” and the stereotype is strengthened by what is the most trustworthy source—the object itself. The cultural Other proves to be Other indeed. Therefore, the next part of this article will deal with the process of identifying with the witch stereotype by the Polish feminists, and their use of those images for their social and political activism.

The Intertwining Web of Feminism, Witchcraft, and Politics

The phenomenon of the assimilation of the witch stereotype to the women’s spirituality movement and feminism was an American invention—Ronald Hutton calls it “America’s most distinctive single contribution to [modern] witchcraft.”³³ The multi-faceted links between feminism, women’s spirituality, and witchcraft were

30. Waldron, *Post-Modernism and Witchcraft Histories*, 117.

31. This stereotype has an interesting practical application in Polish marketing. There are small, specialized shops that offer “German chemicals,” meaning domestic detergents manufactured in Germany, which are said to be more effective and have a better smell. The stereotype is very strong: one of the authors of this article had used the example of these shops to illustrate stereotypization psychology during a lecture, and one of the students said, “But, you know, they really *are* better!”

32. Again, a personal anecdote can be relevant. One of the (Polish) authors of this article, participating in an international conference, was accosted by a German colleague with the words “Oh, you’re from Poland. Great. Tell me a joke, as none of us can joke.”

33. Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 341.

given an institutional form when the WITCH organization came into existence in 1968, on All Hallows Eve. The acronym was originally explained as meaning “Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell,” but the interpretation would be playfully altered at various times to suit changing needs and preferences.³⁴ The leaflets, distributed by WITCH, encouraged women to form their own coven of “sister Witches,” addressing the reader: “If you are a woman and dare to look within yourself, you are a Witch... Your power comes from yourself as a woman.”³⁵ This intertwining web, connecting feminism, witchcraft and politics, has been woven gradually, as not everyone involved in the feminist movement agreed to combine “political” and “spiritual,” with some preferring to clearly separate those two dimensions, for which reason the interrelating of all these threads was extremely complex. Yet, the development of the women’s spirituality movement and the second wave of feminism seemed to create a sort of a revolution during the 1970s and later, as thousands of women began to find witchcraft great meaning and satisfaction in witchcraft, be it British Traditional Witchcraft or other witch traditions, and began to dig deeper into it as a way of satisfying both their spiritual and political needs. Feminist-oriented and women-only forms of Wiccan covens or witchcraft associations started to appear in the United States; the Susan B. Anthony Coven, established in 1971 and named after a famous American suffragist leader, was the first of them. The coven was founded by Z. (Zsuzsanna) Budapest, who also developed a women-only form of Wicca known as “Dianic” Wicca, centered on the Roman goddess Diana but incorporating other goddesses as well. Some feminist witchcraft covens allowed male participants while others excluded men from membership or participation.

Once again, the whole relationship between feminism, politics, modern witchcraft, and women’s spirituality is multifarious, yet one main thread in this intertwining web may be singled out from the others—rebellion against the existing patriarchal order, giving women power and strength. As the feminist and Dianic high priestess Morgan McFarland noticed,

34. For example, “Women Incensed at Telephone Company Harassment” at the demonstration against the policies of Bell Telephone Company. See Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon. Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (New York: Penguin, 2006 [1979]), 181–83.

35. *Ibid.*, 208.

feminism implies equality, self-identification, and individual strength for women. Paganism has been, for all practical purposes, anti-establishment spirituality. Feminists and Pagans are both coming from the same source without realizing it, and heading toward the same goal without realizing it.³⁶

Nowadays, much of the feminist revolution seems stalled, but in the 1970s and 1980s, the mood of rebellion was very intense and connected feminist politics to feminist witchcraft or more broadly speaking, the “women’s spirituality” movement” at a deep level. The echoes of that mood can be heard up to the present day. As Margot Adler reflected, “Women’s spirituality has given countless women a sense of health and empowerment, and this process clearly continues for a new generation of woman.”³⁷

Two very prominent figures in the feminist-witchcraft-politics web must be presented here: Zsuzsanna Budapest and Miriam Simos, more commonly known as Starhawk. Z. Budapest has already been mentioned as the founder of the Susan B. Anthony Coven and the women-only, Dianic form of Wicca. Born Emese Mokcsay in Hungary in 1940, she fled from Hungary after the collapse of the revolution in 1956, lived several years in Austria, and then emigrated to the United States in 1959. After studying theatre at the University of Chicago and working as a journalist, Budapest discovered the feminist movement, embraced a lesbian identity, and started to teach feminist Wicca in southern California. She established a shop called Feminist Wicca, where she sold various witchcraft-items, from candles to incense, and read Tarot cards as a method of fortune-telling. For the latter activity, Budapest was arrested and convicted in 1975, as up to 1985, the state of California considered reading the Tarot cards as a crime.³⁸ The case was appealed and the verdict ultimately reversed by the California Supreme Court, which brought fame to Budapest and new public awareness of Wicca and feminist witchcraft.

Despite suffering this modern form of witch-persecution, Budapest continued to develop her practice of witchcraft, at first calling her tradition just “Wicca,” later adding the adjective “Dianic,” referring to Leland’s deity of witches,³⁹ and developing the aforemen-

36. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 184.

37. *Ibid.*, 238.

38. Doreen Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* (Custer, Wash.: Phoenix Publishing Inc., 1989), 186–87.

39. Cf. Charles Godfrey Leland, *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (London: David Nutt, 1899).

tioned Dianic form of Wicca. Budapest has claimed that over seven hundred women were eventually initiated into Dianic Wicca.⁴⁰

It was in Z. Budapest's shop where Miriam Simos, the future Starhawk, born 1951 in the United States, first encountered the union of feminism and witchcraft, a union which immediately seemed perfectly understandable to her.⁴¹ Starhawk would become the most famous feminist witch in the world, the initiator of the Reclaiming tradition of feminist witchcraft, and a well-respected author of numerous books on women's spirituality and related social and political issues as well as several novels. She has also been a zealous peace, environmental, and social justice activist, participating in numerous demonstrations, conferences and workshops over many years, often interweaving rituals and protests.⁴² She once commented, "Personally, I stopped counting my arrests in direct action when they numbered something like two dozen."⁴³ Starhawk has been widely praised as a highly gifted writer and as one of the most articulate spokeswomen for feminist witchcraft and women's spirituality. She is best-known for her very first book, *The Spiral Dance*, which was first published in 1979 and has enjoyed a wide readership ever since. As Ronald Hutton explains the appeal of this work, Starhawk "reinterpreted magic in terms of human psychology," speaking about witchcraft as a religion full of joy and affirmation of life.⁴⁴ Starhawk pictured herself as truly devoted to the Goddess, underlining that

The importance of the Goddess symbol for woman cannot be overstressed. The image of the Goddess inspires women to see ourselves as divine, our bodies as sacred, the changing phases of our lives as holy Through the Goddess, we can discover our strength . . . move beyond narrow, constricting roles and become whole.⁴⁵

In *The Spiral Dance*, psychology, philosophy, magic, and the worship of the God and Goddess mix with more practical information: the structure of a coven, the methods for performing rituals and creating sacred space, and also examples of magic spells and various spiritual

40. Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 344.

41. Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*, 187.

42. For a detailed ethnographic account of Reclaiming, see Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: The Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* (London: Routledge, 2002).

43. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance. A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess. 20th Anniversary Edition* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999), 7.

44. Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 346.

45. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 34.

exercises. That is why renowned Wiccan priestess Doreen Valiente calls Starhawk's *opus magnum*, along with Budapest's *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*, "practically a new Book of Shadows" referring to the most sacred text in Wicca, adding that "no feminist witchcraft coven today need be without rituals or guidance from these sources."⁴⁶

The reception of Starhawk's work in Poland officially dates back to the first decade of the twenty-first century – her first work translated into Polish was her novel *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, which was published in 2001.⁴⁷ She was acknowledged as an influential figure of contemporary Paganism by Polish Traditional Wiccans and others interested in modern witchcraft. Jelonek, an initiated high priest of Alexandrian Wicca, describes Starhawk on his website as an "institution." "One can accept her views or not, but surely it is worth to get acquainted with them," he adds.⁴⁸ Enenna, a high priestess from a different Wiccan lineage, reviews *The Spiral Dance* with great enthusiasm: "The first step towards witchcraft for many people. Captivating. Inspiring."⁴⁹ She was the one to finally translate the book into Polish in 2016.⁵⁰

Starhawk visited Poland first in September 2010, giving a talk on the topic of "Frontline Spirituality for Earth, Community, and Ourselves" and a workshop entitled "Spirituality in Action: Our Mission in Times of Chaos and Change." Both of those events based on Starhawk's teaching of the connection between the Earth, power of Nature and spirituality, including rituals and personal social activism.⁵¹ On this occasion an interview with Starhawk was published in *Trzy kolory* (more about the magazine below), accompanied by an impassioned review of *The Spiral Dance*: "It is a work beyond value for the whole Pagan environment, also for all those interested in spirituality which centers around a goddess, nature and woman ... exceptional book."⁵² Starhawk's second visit, in September 2011, also

46. Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*, 187.

47. Starhawk, *Piąty święty żywioł*, trans. Anna Sokołowska (Poznań: Zys i S-ka, 2001).

48. Jelonek, "Wartościowelinki," <http://dzikigon.pl/wspolczesne-czarownictwo/wartosciowe-linki-wicca-czarownictwo-czarostwo/>

49. Enenna, "Lektury po polsku," <http://wicca.pl/?art=15>

50. Starhawk, *Taniec Spirali. Odrodzenie religii Starożytnej Bogini*, trans. Enenna, (London: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2016).

51. The program of the talk and the workshop accessed on the site of the organizer (Meloway) via the Internet Wayback Machine, <https://tinyurl.com/20100819005527>

52. Ewa Bury, "Duchowość wzywa mnie do działania," *Dziwictwo. Trzy kolory: Sabatnik boginiczno-feministyczny* 1 (2010): 10.

centered around workshops, talks and rituals, but more in the light of her novel *The Fifth Sacred Thing*.⁵³ Up to this very day she is seen in Poland as a feminist-witch-ecologist, both in Pagan environment, but also in feminist and eco-friendly discourse.⁵⁴

Does a Feminist = a Witch? Weaving the Web in Poland

Feminist and witch discourses seem to entwine and inspire each other, and here, some examples will be presented to show how this dynamic manifests itself in the Polish case. First, we will examine the institution of Sabatnik and *Trzy kolory* (Three colors) magazine, and second, the First Official Rally of 21st Century Witches in Kielce and finally, the case of Katarzyna Zimmermann, the recently rehabilitated witch of Słupsk.

Trzy kolory was a quarterly magazine, published between 2010–2012 on every modern Pagan Sabbath.⁵⁵ Its subtitle, “Sabatnik boginiczno-feministyczny,” which could be freely translated as “Goddess and Feminist Sabbatic,” clearly shows the path chosen by the editorial team.⁵⁶ Agnieszka Kraska, the originator of the magazine, recalls:

I experienced a revelation. I will make a paper. A magazine. About the Goddess. And women. Feministic . . . About Wicca. About herbs. About the body. About what is in us. About witches. About sisterhood. About non-consumer lifestyles. About collectives and communities. About magic and rituals. And I will invite women, my sisters, to the project.⁵⁷

Alongside with her partner, Ewa Bury, and a few friends, Krzaska prepared and published online the very first issue with the subtitle “Dziewictwo” (Virginity). The three colors mentioned in the title of

53. See the invitation on Taraka website, http://www.taraka.pl/?ad=og_starhawk_0811

54. For example, she has been referred to as a key representative of “mystic eco-feminism” on “ABC ekofeminizmu,” <http://ulicaekologiczna.pl/zdrowy-tryb-zycia/kobieta-natura-i-swiat-troche-o-ekofeminizmie/>

55. It is not to be confused with the identically-named trilogy of films made in the early 1990s by the renowned Polish film director Krzysztof Kieślowski.

56. Here it should be mentioned that there are three main genders in Polish language, masculine, feminine and neuter, which results in complicated noun inflection. Sometimes, using primarily the feminine gender may be significant—and so it happens in the case of *Trzy kolory*. For example, the editorial board refers to themselves as “wydawczynie” (editrices) instead of “wydawcy” (editors).

57. Agnieszka Krzaska, “Narodziny.” *Dziewictwo. Trzy kolory. Sabatnik boginiczno-feministyczny* 1 (2010): 3.

the magazine were supposed to symbolize three aspects of stages of womanhood: white represented young women, childhood and virginity; red – motherhood, fullness, sex and body; lastly, black – old age, death, ancestors and witches,⁵⁸ which makes a clear reference to the three aspects of the Triple Goddess. The first issue contained an article on the virgin goddess Artemis, women's histories on losing virginity, and the aforementioned interview with Starhawk herself. The Goddess-feminist collective continued to publish further issues, including witch and contemporary Pagan-oriented articles in each and every one of the them.⁵⁹ The magazine was later transformed into a website, now known as *Sabatnik: Magazyn boginiczno-feministyczny*, which was supposed to function as a blog, yet is rarely updated. A closed group on Facebook related to the website and former magazine also exists.

One issue of *Trzy kolory* is especially worthy of a more thorough look: the sixth one, published in 2011, which was dedicated solely to the topic of witches and subtitled "Wiedźmy i czarownice" (Hags and witches.)⁶⁰ Among the articles, a depiction of Lilith as a foremother of emancipated women can be found, as well as a brief history of the witch-hunt and, most importantly, numerous personal views of what term "witch" means to various women in Poland:

Something a woman is born with. As this applies only to women, men function differently. Greater openness to the so-called non-material side of life, deeper experience of everything, empathy enough and to spare (Elwinga, modern Druid).

Being a witch means independence and the way to freedom. Obtaining knowledge and contact with reality most people are closed to (Gwen, a witch).⁶¹

For me every woman conscious of herself is a witch. She has contact with her body, emotions, visions, intuition, independent mind – she knows, who she is.⁶²

58. Ibid.

59. For example, an article on Reclaiming tradition by Oskar Majda in issue 4 (2011), review of Morgana's *Beyond broomstick* by Ewa Bury in issue 9 (2012).

60. *Wiedźmy i czarownice. Trzy kolory: Sabatnik boginiczno-feministyczny* 6 (2011).

61. First two excerpts come from the "Women of Power" project interviews in *Wiedźmy i czarownice. Trzy kolory: Sabatnik boginiczno-feministyczny* 6 (2011): 30. More about the project itself in the section "Witches live in art" of this article.

62. Maria Ela Lewańska, "Czy jestem wiedźmą?," *Wiedźmy i czarownice. Trzy kolory: Sabatnik boginiczno-feministyczny* 6 (2011): 7.

Modern witches . . . do not have to do magic at all. It is for the characters who do not fit in the binding standard who are called "witches": those too pretty and too ugly, those who see beyond everyone around, those who take liberties, the weird ones, who are strong enough to stick to their uncommon choices A witch is the malevolent Other: a square of a woman.⁶³

The general image, emerging from this very issue of the magazine, presents the witch as the one who knows more and feels more, connects with Nature and/or some other planes (material or non-material), the one who has been ostracized and persecuted. As for her psychological profile, a witch is strong and self-conscious, using her inner power to make the world better. And most importantly, she is a woman, a tough, brave female figure. This would be the whole case of *Trzy kolory* and *Sabatnik*: the witch is included in broader spiritual woman-independence discourse.

The second case, the First Official Rally of 21st Century Witches, took place in the region of Świętokrzyskie (Holy cross, as a reference to the Holy Cross Sanctuary on Łysa Góra) in 2015. This region, located in central Poland, is strongly connected with witches. The second highest peak of the Świętokrzyski Mountains, called Łysa Góra (Bald mountain, though the name of the Holy Cross is also sometimes applied to the place because of the aforementioned sanctuary) is associated in popular thinking with the legendary witches' Sabbaths.⁶⁴ This is due to awareness that in the early Middle Ages, before the erection of a significant Christian sanctuary, Łysa Góra was a center of Pagan worship. As Pagan religion and witches are often lumped together, the site has thus become associated with witches.⁶⁵ Building on this chain of associations, witchcraft has become a way to promote the region. One of the official advertisements entitled "Świętokrzyskie charms – fly for a weekend!" is worth mentioning, as well as the logo of Świętokrzyskie, combined from a letter "Ś" and a figure of a witch on her broomstick.⁶⁶ Another means of pro-

63. Ewa Bury, Enenna, Agnieszka Kraska, "Kim są wiedźmy i czarownice?" *Wiedźmy i czarownice. Trzy kolory: Sabatnik boginiczno-feministyczny* 6 (2011): 8.

64. There are a few mountains and hills of that name in Poland and the neighboring countries. Most of them are connected to witchcraft legends.

65. Jerzy Gąssowski, "Archeologia o schyłkowym pogaństwie," *Archeologia Polski* 37, nos. 1–2 (1992): 137–57. Ewa Bury in the article "W poszukiwaniu utraconej mocy" also writes about a trip tracing the Pagan cult sites of Świętokrzyskiel: see "Dziwactwo" *Trzy kolory: Sabatnik boginiczno-feministyczny* 1 (2010): 57.

66. "Świętokrzyskie czaruje – poleć na weekend!" From official portal of the region, "Wrota Świętokrzyskie," <https://tinyurl.com/pio-zawartosc>.

moting the region is a major music festival called "Sabat Czarownic" (The sabbath of the witches), which has been held six times between 2010 and 2015,⁶⁷ with some quite famous Polish musicians (like Bajm, Afromental, Justyna Steczkowska or Kombi) performing for large audiences. However, not everyone was well disposed towards the festival. Some ultra-conservative right-wing and Catholic church-associated individuals strongly opposed the playfully witchy and demonic trappings of the event. This opposition reached its peak in 2015, when the bishop of Kielce, Jan Piotrowski, criticized the whole idea of the festival during a Sunday mass, especially the planned concert of Conchita Wurst.⁶⁸ Delivering a homily, he implored, "Let the Świętokrzyski Land be the land abundant with decency Without the Witches' Sabbath, without the witches. Without morally corrupting cultural events," perceiving the performance of the drag queen and the whole idea of the festival as immoral.⁶⁹

The feminist/witch reaction to the bishop's critique was very interesting. Małgorzata Marenin, a feminist, equal rights activist, and the president of the Stop Stereotypes Society, organized the aforementioned First Official Rally of the 21st Century Witches (Pierwszy Zlot Czarownic! XXI Wieku" in Kielce on 20th September 2015 as a mass demonstration in favor of tolerance.⁷⁰ Marenin decided to inaugurate a party called "The Rally of the Witches," which intended to be an annual tradition. The aim of the rally was to allow the ladies "who are 21st century witches according to the Catholic Church"⁷¹ to meet and discuss all the problems of being a woman in modern times. As Marenin wrote in the official invitation to the first rally,

In the 21st century it is enough to be a feminist, an atheist, ecologist or support the *in vitro* method to be condemned by the Catholic Church, just as it [the Church] once cursed, persecuted and burned on stakes women accused of witchcraft.⁷²

67. The 2016 event was canceled due to lack of funds.

68. Conchita Wurst is the pseudonym of an Austrian artist who won the Eurovision Song Contest 2014. He performs as a drag queen, which aroused the bishop's anxiety.

69. Our translation. Mariusz Kołodziej, "Biskup kielecki Jan Piotrowski krytykuje Sabat Czarownic i występ Conchity Wurst," *Echo dnia*, June 4, 2015,, <https://tinyurl.com/art-8136324>

70. "Stowarzyszenie Stop Stereotypom," a6, <https://www.facebook.com/StowarzyszenieStopStereotypom>

71. The original spelling has been kept, including writing "the catholic church" without capital letters. <https://tinyurl.com/1073741831-1701>

72. In Polish only feminine forms are used: "feministka" ("she-feminist"),

So far, only one rally has been organized – and not without problems.⁷³ The first venue of the rally was supposed to be at the conference hall in the Castle Hill of Kielce, but the day before the event the director of the Castle Hill declined the permission previously given, stating that the organizer (i.e. Marenin) was a candidate in the upcoming Polish parliamentary election and the Castle Hill cannot engage in any political campaign. The rally was therefore held in the Café Zamkowa, nearby the Castle Hill. Among the invited guests and speakers was a Buddhist, a practitioner of alternative medicine, and a fortune-teller, all of whom were women, along with a prominent figure in Polish gender discourse: Anna Grodzka, a politician and a transgender woman.⁷⁴ There were speeches and discussions about problems of women in Poland, but the main (in relation to the progressive subjection to clerical influence) topic was the oppressive role of the Catholic Church. A “witch” in this context was a woman capable of living in stout opposition to the Catholic Church. In Marenin’s words, the witches were all those “beautiful, intelligent, brave women who step beyond the so-called convention of normality.”⁷⁵ This bold proclamation portrays a witch as a strong and independent woman, daring to act against Polish stereotypes and the influence of the Church.

The last case to be considered here concerns the rehabilitation of Katarzyna Zimmermann, more commonly known by the derogatory nickname “Trina Papisten,” (which can be loosely translated as “Katie the Catholic”) condemned for witchcraft and burned in 1701. She used to sell herbs and mixtures that were apparently more popular than those prepared by the local apothecary. It would seem that this person’s desire to eliminate his female competitor is the likely reason why an accusation of witchcraft was made against Zimmermann, as the complaint was filed by none other than the apothecary. The official indictment, consisting of sixty-eight paragraphs altogether, did not accuse her of any medical malfeasance for her healing practices, but instead presented her supposed contacts with the Devil as the gravest misdeed. Zimmermann was brutally tortured

“ateistka” (“she-atheist”), *ekolożka* (“she-ecologist”). The official text of the invitation, published *via* Facebook, <https://tinyurl.com/a-179041642297794>

73. The second edition in planned for September 2016. Małgorzata Marenin, e-mail message to JMK, July 7, 2016.

74. Angelina Kosiek, “Wzgórze Zamkowe nie dla ‘czarownic’”. Dyrektor odmówił sali,” *Gazeta Wyborcza Kielce*, June 20, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/18858653>

75. Fragment of the opening speech, see <https://tinyurl.com/459500174251938>

until she pleaded guilty to all accusations and then burned at the stake.⁷⁶ Though coming long after the blatant injustice of her trial and execution, a kind of rehabilitation was proposed in 2016. Although no official court procedure was applied,⁷⁷ a symbolical act rendered Trina Papisten – that is, Katarzyna Zimmermann – a potent symbol of all victims of witch hunts and female oppression.

In June 2016 a roundabout in Słupsk has been named after Zimmermann – or, actually, after her nickname. This act was proudly promoted by the mayor of Słupsk, Robert Biedroń, a somewhat liberal politician. “We have a roundabout of Trina Papisten. Legendary witch of Słupsk rehabilitated. No such thing has ever happened in Poland before!” he wrote on his official Twitter account.⁷⁸ The reactions to this idea of course varied, with some comments expressing strong approval (“Great news – CONGRATULATIONS, Mr. Mayor, for everything you do!,” commented one Twitter user),⁷⁹ some more ironic and doubting.⁸⁰ The most dramatic reaction was provided by the ultra-Catholic portal Fronda.pl (famous for its typically very emotional and extreme statements and positions). “Burn Biedroń! He rehabilitates the witches!!”⁸¹ exhorted the first article on Fronda.pl, only to slightly change the line a few days later: “The witch of Słupsk is a *Catholic* martyr – a victim of Protestants. Biedroń shot himself in the foot!”⁸² Both articles were written to condemn Biedroń and discredit his actions – not only due to the fact that a witch was

76. “Trina Papisten, słupska czarownica będzie miała swoje rondo! To rodzaj jej rehabilitacji,” *Słupsk.pl*, June 29, 2016, <http://www.slupsk.pl/trina-papisten-slupska-czarownica-bedzie-miala-swoje-rondo-to-rodzaj-jej-rehabilitacji-55411/>. See also Jolanta Nitkowska-Węglarz, *Słupsk: Miasto niezwykłe* (Słupsk: Wydawnictwo Ośrodka Informacji Turystycznej i Promocji Miasta, 2001), 31–33.

77. Information provided by the Tourist Information Centre in Słupsk, February 09, 2017.

78. Our translation. Robert Biedroń on his official Twitter account, June 29, 2016, <https://twitter.com/RobertBiedron/status/748216134055432192>.

79. Our translation. Agata Golebiowska, June 29, 2016 (13:14), comment on Biedroń’s status, <https://twitter.com/RobertBiedron/status/748216134055432192>.

80. “Why the rehabilitation of her contemptuous nickname given by executioners, and not by her real name and surname, Katarzyna Zimmermann?” Our translation. Mariusz Brokos, June 29, 2016 (11:57), comment on Biedroń’s status, <https://twitter.com/RobertBiedron/status/748216134055432192>.

81. “Na stos z Biedroniem! Rehabilituje czarownice!!!” <http://www.fronda.pl/a/na-stos-z-biedroniem-rehabilituje-czarownice,74239.html>.

82. “Słupska czarownica to katolicka męczennica - ofiara protestantów. Biedroń strzelił sobie w stopę!” <http://www.fronda.pl/a/slupska-czarownica-to-katolicka-meczennica-ofiara-protestantow-biedron-strzelil-sobie-w-stopę,74349.html>.

involved in the case, but also because the mayor of Słupsk is known to be homosexual. The case of Katarzyna Zimmermann proves that witch persecution still raises many controversies and emotions on all sides. Though the Catholic Church, through Fronda, may mock Biedroń for “making a martyr of the fight for women’s equal rights out of this miserable woman [i.e. Zimmermann],”⁸³ the mayor has revealed that many women have written to him, saying things like, “all the modern witches thank you for commemorating her.”⁸⁴

Witch Lives in Contemporary Arts

The force of the stereotypical image of witches is demonstrated very well by what happened in the Polish town of Czeladź (thirty thousand inhabitants, Silesian region). In 1730s, in the town square, Katarzyna Włodyczkowa was beheaded for witchcraft after the waters of a flood which rampaged through the city mysteriously stopped at the threshold of her house. The actual facts of the situation were far more mundane than magical, as proclaimed by the ecclesiastical court several years later, when the mayor and the bailiff were found guilty of conspiring to confiscate Włodyczkowa’s considerable possessions through accusing her of witchcraft in relation to the floodwater incident. The widow Włodyczkowa herself was posthumously cleared of the charge of witchcraft, her trial declared unlawful and the accusation false.⁸⁵ Włodyczkowa’s name was thus cleared quite quickly, unlike the nearly four hundred years that it took for Katarzyna Zimmermann, and the episode itself would at most serve as proof of the corruption of the local authorities at the time, if it was not for its sequel, which took place in 2008. In that year, the mayor of the town of Czeladź had decided to erect a statue to commemorate the “witch of Czeladź,” but this was never accomplished due to the a negative public response, with the townspeople voicing their strong disagreement with bestowing such honor on witches. The statue itself had, however, already been commissioned and sculpted by the artist Jacek Kiciński, who had previously sculpted several

83. Ibid.

84. Robert Biedroń on his official Twitter account, June 30, 2016, <https://twitter.com/RobertBiedron/status/748461847414775809>.

85. Antonina Szybowska, “Czeladzka czarownica: trudne dziedzictwo,” in *Czarownice: studia z kulturowej historii fenomenu* ed. Adam Anczyk, Julia Doroszevska, Karolina Maria Hess (Katowice: Sacrum), 11–20.

Christian religious statues.⁸⁶ The artist's vision clearly presents various elements of the witch stereotype. The statue presents a woman of middle age, her face stern, but harmoniously handsome, her hair strewn back wildly as by a gust of wind, astride a broomstick. It can put the onlooker in mind of such fictional witches as Minerva McGonagall of the Harry Potter series, or Granny Weatherwax, the witch of Terry Pratchett's Discworld, albeit in her younger years. Putting aside the fact that Katarzyna Włodyczkowska herself would probably have worn different attire more befitting a widowed woman from the early eighteenth century, and that *ipso facto* she was not a witch, one cannot deny that Kiciński's statue is quite striking. It brings together the proto-witch and her inevitable broomstick with the feminist interpretation: the statue's face is not a malignant grimace covered in warts, but a triumphant exaltation of the human being which can soar in the sky on a household implement. The dynamic pose makes the statue realistic and lively. It is not only a proof of the influence that the stereotypical witch image has on artistic imagination, as in this case, the image triumphed over actual history, since Włodyczkowska was not in fact a witch, but also an example of its cultural shift, of reincarnating the once-despised witch into the independent woman proud of her craft. Nevertheless, the statue had succumbed to the negative view of witches, which ultimately prevented its installation in the public space. This brings us back to Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska's research, and a conclusion that the classical witch stereotype has a powerful influence not only on the young but on adult participants in Polish culture as well, and can even leave its mark on decisions about public space in Poland in the twenty-first century.

Another artistic project worth mentioning in the witch-context is the "Women of Power" exhibition. Katarzyna Majak, Polish photographer, who was also involved with *Trzy kolory* magazine, gathered a collection of portraits, depicting "women identifying themselves with the spirituality of their ancestors, be it Mother Goddess, pagan beliefs, and other old sources of wisdom."⁸⁷ Tracing various different spiritual paths, she met, photographed and interviewed twenty-nine women—the youngest of them was in her early thirties, the oldest in her late eighties. Among them a healer, a *szeptucha* (whisperer),⁸⁸

86. Cf. Jacek Kiciński – Personal Webpage, <http://www.jacekkicinski.pl/>.

87. *Women of Power Project*, <http://www.womenofpower.pl/project.html>

88. Also referred to as *szeptuna*, *szeptunka*, a folk healer, who offers magical treatment. The term can be translated as "a woman who whispers" (a reference to

"the one who listens to the Woods," a contemporary Druid and one of the first initiated Traditional Wiccans in Poland can be found. All of these Women of Power are depicted in full-ritual clothing, in abundant robes or with certain attributes of magical meaning. Although the title centres simply around women's power, the hints of witchcraft are more than subtle. As Majak presents her heroines, their activity can be described as *wiedźmowanie* (witching), that is, using the knowledge obtained from the contact with nature, from intuitive recognition; [their activity is] based on the belief in the power of ritual practices and objects.⁸⁹

The project has also gained recognition outside Poland. Majak was given a solo exhibition in the Porter Contemporary gallery in New York City in 2012⁹⁰ and one year later, in the Central European House of Photography in Bratislava, with the Slovak title *Ženy Moci* (Women of power). Some articles were published as well, for example, the website of Women in the World, in association with *The New York Times*, published an interview with Katarzyna Majak entitled "Mesmerizing Photos of Poland's Contemporary Witches and Healers."⁹¹ Majak herself continues to promote various workshops and open meetings for women on her official Facebook page (*Women of Power/ Kobiety Mocy*), where she also provides motivational quotations and inspiring photographs connected to women's spirituality.⁹²

It was in a spirit of rebellion against patriarchal culture and the dominant, negative witch stereotype that theatre director Dorota Bielska staged her play *Skazane na Ogień* (Condemned to fire),⁹³ the third example of the witch theme in contemporary Polish arts that will be considered here. The play is "an artistic rehabilitation of THE

verbal magic, spellcasting), "whisperer." Today most Polish whisperers live in Podlasie region, in the east of the country.

89. Our translation. *Kobiety Mocy. O projekcie*, http://www.kobietymocy.com/o_projekcie.html.

90. *Porter/contemporary*, <http://www.portercontemporary.com/women-of-power-katarzyna-majak/>.

91. Kathy Booth, "Mesmerizing Photos of Poland's Contemporary Witches and Healers," *Women in the World*, June 25, 2015, <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2015/06/25/mesmerizing-photos-of-polands-contemporary-witches-and-healers/>.

92. *Women Of Power/ Kobiety Mocy*, <https://www.facebook.com/WOMEN-OF-POWER-KOBIETY-MOCY-163679030390974/>.

93. Dorota Bielska, *Skazane Na Ogień* (Poland: The Grotowski Institute, 2015).

WITCH" (small caps in the original.)⁹⁴ The witch in the play is seen as an archetype that "ties into strength, into beauty and ugliness, sex and asexuality, into menstruation, magic, nature, moon, cat, night, fear, bravery, herbs, charms, freedom, independence, and a clear, resounding "I" . . . it expresses deep environmentalism . . . hails tradition and teaches us to respect the wisdom of the elders."⁹⁵ The play is targeted at women and aims to provoke a cathartic experience through which women are to reach those archetypal traits, seen as the apotheosis of femininity that has been forgotten and shunned by the masculinized culture. "We, women, need the witch; when the term 'witch' is receptively modified women can access those aspects of their personalities that have been denied and pushed away for ages, those traits that prove their strength, personal freedom and their difference from men, without evaluating that difference."⁹⁶ By referring to the witch archetype, the play speaks of women's discrimination and stands against the devaluation of women and femininity in modern culture.

Using artistic means, the play expresses ideas about witches that are largely in agreement with those of Polish feminism. The traditional witch stereotype is inverted, so that images associated with the persecution of witches, such as nooses used for hanging and the smoke from the burning of witches at the stake, are taken as expressions of core femininity. This play shows how the Polish feminist understanding of the witch as a positive female figure can subvert the traditional witch stereotype in powerful and artistically interesting ways.

Conclusion

The witch is, as Ronald Hutton states, "one of the very few images of independent female power that traditional European culture has bequeathed to the present."⁹⁷ The power symbolism is very important in feminist discourse on witches, as seen in our examples from the Polish context. The concept of power is crucial to feminist discourse as a whole, which approaches the idea of power, of who wields power, and who is allowed to wield or not wield power, as

94. "Skazane Na Ogień – Spektakl," <https://tinyurl.com/y8hl8xhx>.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.

97. Ronald Hutton, "The Status of Witchcraft in the Modern World," *Pomegranate* 9, no. 2 (2007): 123.

a culturally dependent variable. Identifying with the witch stereotype is supposed to help women not only reach into their deeper nature, but also to find the power to change reality – that is, to take social and political action. The witch, the bearer of magical power, is, in feminist interpretation also the bearer of another kind of power, the power of femininity. She also incorporates an important facet of women's emancipation from patriarchal reality – the spiritual aspect, which has made her the object of persecution by the Roman Catholic church.⁹⁸ As Roman Catholicism is the dominant creed of Poland, the image of witches can be seen as not only a subversive symbol of subculture, but of counterculture.

Introducing the image of witches into Polish feminist discourse is also a way of reclaiming it, reintroducing it to Polish culture, and, in consequence, bringing new meaning to it. In this undertaking, Anglo-Saxon influences as filtered through Wicca are clearly visible, but the local Pagan folklore of Poland also plays an important part. The witch serves feminist ideas well, and creates a feeling of sisterhood with other witches of the world through its most basic trait, femininity. The identity aspect is not without meaning: saying "I am a witch" in Poland, where Wicca and modern witchcraft are not very popular, can be a manifestation of belonging, of identifying with the feminist movement or with positive, empowering witch traits as interpreted by feminism.⁹⁹ Such identification can, however, have undesirable social consequences. As Hanegraaff says, "Even though modern witches may do what they can to introduce a new stereotype, outsiders still often judge them according to the old ones."¹⁰⁰ This is so because outside the milieu described in this article, "witch" remains, in Polish common usage, an insult.

It would seem that Polish reinterpretations and revaluations of the image of the witch have been inspired in part by Western trends such as feminism, Wicca, and the goddess and women's spirituality movements. These cultural trends came to Poland with a certain time lag, given the years of Communist isolation from Western culture. The witch stereotype had already been explored and reinterpreted by Western feminism, contemporary Paganism, and individuals adhering to these movements. It would be interesting to

98. Tracy L. Luff, "Wicca: Adding a Spiritual Dimension to Feminism," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 35 (1990): 92 (the author uses a non-standard term, "wicce").

99. Further research among those Poles who identify as witches would be interesting and would give a better insight into the phenomenon.

100. Hanegraaff, "From the Devil's Gateway to the Goddess Within," 309.

examine the trajectory of those cultural imports and their adaptation to Polish cultural reality. In modern Poland, the religious elements of the witch stereotype, such as, for example, the Wiccan interpretation are not popular, although witches fit well into the “spirituality” paradigm, in this case women’s spirituality, and possibly into the New Age-New Spirituality phenomenon, becoming something akin to secular sacralizations.¹⁰¹ For example, religious ideas drawn from Wicca or the goddess movement and separated from their religious contexts, can then be secularized and used for more practical purposes. Feminist movements in Poland discover the unknown, or less known areas of our culture, and bring them into the mainstream society, into politics, into culture. And in this process of cultural transmission, an interesting phenomenon can be observed: the stereotypical witch, be she Baba Jaga in her hen’s foot cottage, a dark gothic sorceress, a herbalist and midwife, a pagan/Pagan priestess, a falsely accused innocent, a stranger or kin, still embodies the core precept of the feminist movement, which is the effort and toil to free women from patriarchal oppression.

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101. Frans Jespers, “From New Age to New Spiritualities: Secular Sacralizations on the Borders of Religion,” in *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, ed. Steven J Sutcliffe and Ingvild Sælid Gilhus (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 205–208.

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